

GOP Asked to Reassess Its Relationship with American Muslims

We are writing to offer an open invitation to reassess your party's current relationship with American Muslims. As with other demographics, American Muslim support for Republicans has dropped precipitously in recent years. This shift away from the GOP is not set in stone, but its future direction is dependent on choices your party makes.

It is well known that the majority of the American Muslim vote went to Texas Governor George W. Bush in the 2000 election. However, by 2006 only 17 percent of American Muslim registered voters self-identified as Republican. In 2008, that number had dropped to 8 percent. In an October 2012 poll conducted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, it was 9 percent.

That recent poll also found that only 12 percent of respondents perceive Republicans as being committed to upholding the Constitution.

This perception has a basis in Republican Party members' actions.

In 2011 and 2012, 78 bills or amendments aimed at interfering with Islamic religious practices were considered in 31 states and the U.S. Congress. Seventy-three of these bills were introduced solely by Republicans. These were not just fringe legislators; in too many cases they included state-level GOP leadership.

In supporting such efforts to introduce government-sanctioned discrimination against Muslims, members of your party have made despicable Islamophobic remarks. South Dakota anti-Islam bill sponsor Phil Jensen (R-District 33) told an audience, "It is alarming how many of our sisters and daughters who attend American universities are now marrying Muslim men." Alaska state Rep. Carl Gatto (R-Palmer) said his anti-Islam legislation was necessary because of the religious beliefs of recent immigrants. "As a kid, we had Italian neighborhoods, Irish neighborhoods. . .but they didn't impose their own laws," Gatto said. "When these neighborhoods are occupied by people from the Middle East, they do establish their own laws." Such anti-immigrant fear mongering needs to be clearly rejected.

In at least 11 states, mainstream Republican leaders introduced or supported anti-Muslim legislation.

Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin ignored the Constitution's proscription against government censure of religion when she threw her influence behind House Bill 1552, a version of Islamophobe David Yerushalmi's model anti-Islam legislation, saying, "I personally believe that a law should be made on American law, on our constitution. The people of Oklahoma spoke pretty clearly when there was a vote...on Sharia law."¹

Rep. Gatto, who supported an anti-Islam bill, is chairman of the Alaska State Legislature's House Judiciary Committee. The originator of Michigan's anti-Islam bill was Rep. Dave Agema, the majority caucus chair. Missouri Speaker of the House Stephen Tilley supported such a bill. In South Dakota, original sponsor Charles Hoffman was the majority whip.

We repeatedly hear—primarily from Republicans—that our faith is a threat to the United States. Such things have been said about Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and other religions as well.

In each of those cases, history has proven the voices of unreason and fear to be wrong.

In contrast to fear-laden assertions that Muslims harbor traitorous intentions regarding our Constitution, CAIR's lawsuit against an anti-Islam constitutional amendment in Oklahoma argued that the law violates both the First Amendment and the Supremacy Clause. So far, four federal judges have ruled in our favor. Muslims are defending the Constitution, while elements of your party seek to strip its fundamental protections from a minority faith.

Additionally, mainstream Republican candidates have questioned our loyalty and even threatened to undermine the Constitution in efforts to exclude us from the political process, all without any pushback from party leaders.

During the recent election cycle, Herman Cain said that Muslims who wanted to serve in his administration would have to take loyalty oaths. He explained to Glenn Beck that he would not require similar oaths from Mormons or Catholics "because there is a greater dangerous part of the Muslim faith than there is in these other religions." Article VI of the U.S. Constitution says there is no "religious test" for public office. Despite this, the only response to Cain's assertion was applause from the debate audience.

Rep. Paul Broun (R-GA) expressed his exasperation when "a guy in Arabian dress" did not receive secondary screening in an airport.² A Republican state representative from Tennessee, Rick Womick, said, "Personally, I don't trust one Muslim in our military." He openly agreed that all Muslims should be removed from the military.³

Rather than speak aggressively against extreme voices in the party, there has been a problematic decision by party leadership to give it tacit approval rather than confront it. A classic example occurred in 2005. When Hispanic and Muslim groups criticized former Rep. Tom Tancredo for threatening to nuke the Islamic holy city of Mecca, then party-chairman Ken Melman brushed aside concerns about such extremism saying, "The fact is, we're a big-tent party. I'm proud that we have debate in our party."

We believe that November 6 presented an opportunity to distance your party from anti-Muslim bias and place the voices of bias on the fringe where they belong—still free to speak, but shunned for their intolerance.

We have witnessed some signs recently that this rejection of anti-Islam bias can easily take place if the party commits to confronting intolerance.

Following Islamophobic criticism of his nomination of Sohail Mohammed as a New Jersey Superior Court judge, Governor Chris Christie bluntly stated, "This Sharia law business is just crap. It's just crazy, and I'm tired of dealing with the crazies." Of the nominee, Christie stated, "He is an extraordinary American who is an outstanding lawyer and played an integral role in the post-September 11th period in building bridges between the Muslim American community in this state and law enforcement."⁴

More recently, when Rep. Michele Bachmann led an effort to cast suspicion on Muslims engaged in honorable public service, Sen. John McCain and Rep. John Boehner made welcome comments calling Bachmann's actions into question.

In the spirit of promoting a more inclusive Republican party, we respectfully offer the following thoughts on improving relations between American Muslims and Republicans.

The party establishment should speak out strongly against biased speech within its ranks. Free speech must always be preserved, but biased speech should be relegated to the fringes. Many of the statements quoted above are reflective of an ugly, bygone era in our nation's history. Bias has no place in serious discussions about our nation's policies and future.

The party should make a concerted effort to engage Muslim voters. During this past election cycle, there was a notable unwillingness on the part of Republican candidates to attend non-partisan candidate forums hosted by Muslim groups. Use of anti-Muslim themes—examples such as Rep. Renee Ellmers vile "victory mosque" ad or former-Rep. Allen West's assertions that Islam is not a religion—are too often a Republican electoral tool.

The party establishment should oppose efforts to pass discriminatory legislation. A simple Internet search of "American Laws for American Courts" demonstrates that its author holds biased views of many minorities. While the bill itself makes no direct mention of Islam, it is clearly aimed at stigmatizing Islam. While proof of this is abundant we will offer one example here: "This [bill] doesn't say 'Sharia law,'" Republican State Senator Chris Steineger said in a speech that condemned the legislation for discriminating against Muslims, "but that's how it was marketed back in January and all session long—and I have all the e-mails to prove it."⁵ Steineger was an early supporter of the bill, but turned on it once he recognized the bias it represented. He is an example for other party members.

The party establishment should reject any member's effort to use official public forums to smear a minority. Rep. Peter King's five anti-Muslim hearings generated no appreciable response from Republican leadership. When King asserted that Muslims are not loyal Americans,⁶ Republicans did nothing to put him in check.

During his hearings, not a single witness attempted to factually validate King's longtime allegation that the American Muslim community is run by extremists. Five of the six law enforcement representatives who testified did not support King's assertion that Muslims do not cooperate with law enforcement. That he could not prove his own allegations in a hearing room where he controlled the deck should have come to the notice of leadership and been addressed as the intolerance it was.

Party officials should end the persistent witch-hunt targeting legally operating Muslim institutions. Almost every national Muslim community organization has come under sustained attack from members of your party. These are not the philosophical disagreements expected in a robust political process; rather they are allegations of subversion and ill-intent more characteristic of the "othering" of a minority.

Let us all work together to maintain America's leadership in support of emerging democracies and the rule of law worldwide by promoting the humanitarian principles enshrined in our Constitution's Bill of Rights. May God Almighty bless the United States of America.

Sincerely,

American Muslim Alliance (AMA)
American Muslims for Palestine (AMP)
American Muslim Taskforce on Civil Rights and Elections (AMT)
Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)
Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA)
ICNA Council for Social Justice (CSJ)
The Mosque Cares (Ministry of W. Deen Mohammed)
Muslim American Society Public Affairs and Civic Engagement (MAS-PACE)
Muslim Ummah of North America (MUNA)
Pakistan American Democratic Forum (PADF)
United Voices

¹ Adelle M. Banks. "Oklahoma Gov. Likes Revamped Anti-Sharia Bill," The Oklahoman, March 22, 2011.

² Keith Laing. GOP Lawmaker: I saw TSA pat down a 'little old lady,' child but not Arab man," The Hill, May 25, 2011.

³ Shahid, Aliyah. "Rick Womick, GOP Tennessee state rep: All Muslims serving in the U.S. military should be removed," NY Daily News, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/rick-womick-gop-tennessee-state-rep-muslims-serving-u-s-military-removed-video-article-1.977780>

⁴ Lisa Fleisher, "Christie Blasts Critics of New Judge," Wall Street Journal, 27 July 2011.

⁵ Abed Awad. "The true story of Sharia in American courts," The Nation, June 13, 2012.

⁶ "When a war begins, we're all Americans. But in this case, this is not the situation. And whether it's pressure, whether it's cultural tradition, whatever, the fact is the Muslim community does not cooperate anywhere near to the extent that it should."

—Rep. Peter King interview on *Secure Freedom Radio With Frank Gaffney*, January 6, 2011.

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